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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000137

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SUBJECT: AL SARKHI BECOMES AN APPEALING ALTERNATIVE TO AL SADR FOR VIOLENT, DISAFFECTED YOUNG MEN

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CLASSIFIED BY: Charles Hunter, Regional Coordinator, REO Al Hillah, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

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¶1. (C) Summary: Mahmud Al Hassani Al Sarkhi has begun challenging Muqtada Al Sadr for the allegiance of violent, disaffected young men in south-central Iraq, many of them culled from Sadr's own legions. Sarkhi's willingness to do violence and his lack of political ambition make him an ideal leader of a Shia militia; his Army of the Guardians has grown steadily since his 2004 split from Muqtada Al Sadr. However, Al Sarkhi's eccentricities - he claims to speak to the 12th Imam - have earned him the suspicion of legitimate religious organizations and are likely to thwart any ambition he may harbor to succeed Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al Sadr as a spiritual figure. End summary.

¶2. (C) As Muqtada Al Sadr moves farther towards legitimate political power, a vacuum is being created among anti-Iraqi forces. Al Sadr appears to be looking towards electoral politics as the future of his Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) part. The young, uneducated and unemployed men who have become the backbone of Al Sadr's Jaysh Al Mahdi (JAM), on the other hand, have always been more interested in giving coalition forces a "black eye" than in helping their leader garner political clout. This disconnect, while not portending the end of Al Sadr or JAM's campaign of violence against Coalition and Iraqi security forces, does provide opportunity for more radical and violent groups to coalesce and gather momentum.

¶3. (C) One group taking advantage of the opportunity is the Army of Guardians (AOG). Led by Mahmud Al Hassani Al Sarkhi, a former student of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al Sadr (father of Muqtada) and a former Muqtada Al Sadr lieutenant. AOG seems to embrace violent opposition to Coalition Forces and the Iraqi National Government as its sole purpose. The Karbala-headquartered AOG is composed of four main subgroups directed by Al Sarkhi. Jaysh Al Sarkhi operates in Maysan (Amarah) province, the Al Hassani group is based and conducts its activity in Basrah, the Al Sarkhi Group is located in Dhi Qar province, and the Army of Guardians (not to be confused with the umbrella organization it falls under) is active in the south-central provinces of Diwaniyah, Najaf and Karbala.

¶4. (C) The relationship between Al Sarkhi and Muqtada Al Sadr formed in 2003 as Coalition Forces deposed the Saddam Hussein regime and began the Coalition Provisional Authority. Al Sarkhi returned from exile in Jordan shortly after Saddam's fall, by which time Al Sadr had begun leading the group that would come to be known as Jaysh Al Mahdi (AKA-Mahdi Militia and Mahdi Army Militia). Al Sarkhi, seeing an opportunity to join in the fight, became subordinate to Al Sadr. This phase of the relationship

was short lived, however: following fighting in Najaf in April and August of 2003, Al Sarkhi left JAM, taking with him only a handful of supporters. In early 2005, operating out of Karbala, they numbered some 500 men and began attacks on Iraqi and Coalition forces mainly in the south of Iraq. Since then AOG has continued to gain adherents, with it's membership estimated at some 1500-2000 today.

¶15. (C) Many AOG members, though no following Al Sarkhi, continue their involvement in Jaysh Al Mahdi, and for this reason it remains difficult to ascertain whether AOG or JAM is behind a given violent act. JAM is more a confederation of smaller groups than a monolith controlled by Al Sadr, whose direction of these groups grows more tenuous as he makes his foray into Iraqi politics. Al Sarkhi, for his part, appears to have no political agenda and has proven willing to do whatever is necessary to fight the Iraqi government (i.e. Iraqi Police, Iraqi Army and the Council of Representatives) and Coalition Forces. His single-minded goal, violence and disruption, is particularly attractive to disenchanted JAM members.

¶16. (C) Though Al Sarkhi's reach continues to grow among those ready to use violence, his insistence that he is in direct contact with Imam Al Mahdi (see below) has alienated the Shia religious community. His claim to be the most prominent Shia cleric in Iraq has led some religious leaders to disavow him publicly. In a June 14 appearance on Iranian TV Islamic scholar Sheikh Ali Al Korani called Al Sarkhi "fraudulent (for) claiming to be in constant contact with the hidden Imam." Al Sarkhi followers immediately laid siege to the Iranian consulate in Basrah, raising the Iraqi flag in the compound and demanding that Iran censure Al Korani. (Note: Al Korani is not, as the protestors believed, Iranian. He is Lebanese. End note.)

¶17. (C) Comment: It is likely that a legitimate heir to Muqtada Al Sadr's militia activities will emerge, and Al Sarkhi may ultimately take up that mantle. There are those within JAM who have been baffled by Al Sadr's bids for political power; becoming an "insider" reduces his standing with JAM members who believe the entire political process in Iraq to be illegitimate. But if Al Sarkhi has been able to build an organization thanks

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to Al Sadr's political aspirations, the AOG leader's pronouncements about his relationship with the 12th Imam, are liable to limit any significant expansion of the organization's scope. It must be recalled that Al Sadr, in 2004, was intimating that he too was closely related to the 12th Imam, if not the embodiment of the Imam himself. That was not a winning strategy then, alienating legitimate religious interests and the faithful, and would not be so today. Al Sarkhi claims to be the successor to Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al Sadr. His incomplete studies and his frosty relationship with Iraq's clergy, however, mean that while he may wield power with his militia, he is unlikely ever to rise to prominence as a religious or political force. At this point, it seems that he has no such desire. End comment.

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BIO NOTE

¶18. (C) Mahmud Al Hassani Al Sarkhi was born in Baghdad circa. 1969. His father, Abdul Ridha Al Hassani Al Sarkhi, was a politically moderate attorney. The elder Sarkhi neither worked with the Saddam Hussein regime nor challenged it. Mahmud Al Sarkhi attended Baghdad University and received a degree in civil engineering in 1987. Seven years later, in 1994, he joined the Hawza in Najaf, studying with the Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al Sadr, Muqtada's father. Prior to the Ayatollah's death in 1999, Al Sarkhi was dismissed from his studies for making fantastic claims to regular conversations - over tea, in fact - with the 12th Imam, Al Mahdi. (Note: The 12th Imam will, according to Shia teachings arrive on earth to claim the souls of "true believers." End note.) Al Sarkhi is not recognized as a cleric and is considered an embarrassment by legitimate Shia leaders. Following the assassination of the Ayatollah Al Sadr, however, it was Al Sarkhi who performed the Friday sermon the next week at Kufa mosque. The sermon, a tribute to his former teacher, was an attack on those Sarkhi held responsible for the killing, specifically Saddam Hussein. For this, Al Sarkhi was

arrested and spent one year in prison.HUNTER